

LUNGS BY DUNCAN MACMILLAN: A RETROSPECTIVE

OR

HOW I STOPPED WORRYING AND LEARNED TO LOVE THE SOUND OF MY
OWN VOICE

AN HONORS THESIS (HONR 499)

BY

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Signed

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ABSTRACT

Lungs, a two-person play by Duncan Macmillan, explores the collision between what you want and what the universe needs. It chronicles forty years of a relationship between a man and woman, including two pregnancies, a miscarriage, and a myriad of conversations regarding personal responsibility. Per Macmillan's stage directions, this production was radically minimalistic (no set, no lighting, no soundtrack, etc.), and naturalistic (dialogue that directly reflected how contemporary people speak). Shay Alexi Stewart performed the part of Woman, Joe Colajezzi as Man, and Nathaniel Thomas served as the play's director. The following author's statement describes the impulse to explore minimal theatre in an effort to assuage concerns with the state of American commercial theatre and how the aftermath of said project radically altered the author's larger artistic intentions.

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I would like to thank Nathaniel Thomas for serving as director of *Lungs* and Joe Colajezzi for his talent, support, and endless love as my stage husband and scene partner.

Lastly I would like to express my love to Wendy Saver, Albert Jennings, and Carol and John Stewart. Thank you endlessly.

PROJECT OUTLINE AND JUSTIFICATION

Lungs was first performed at the Studio Theatre in Washington, DC, a theatre “dedicated to the best in contemporary theatre, producing an uncommonly rich and wide-ranging repertoire of provocative new writing” (citation). The fact that the Studio Theatre chose to produce this work peaked my interest, as this selection is an indication of *Lungs*’ place in the theatre world as a nontraditional, trailblazing work of dramatic art. One glance at the script confirmed this observation, as Duncan writes in radically realistic dialogue, requiring in depth textual analysis to chart the ways in which characters’ thoughts tangent, much like they do in our everyday conversations. To further enrich my choice of this play, I referenced several widely reviewed productions. Of the production at Crucible Studios at Sheffield Theatre Complex just outside of London, *The Guardian* stated:

“Duncan Macmillan's distinctive, off-kilter love story is brutally honest, funny, edgy and current. It gives voice to a generation for whom uncertainty is a way of life through two flawed, but deeply human, people who you don't always like but start to feel you might love. It's bravely written, startlingly structured” (Gardner).

In short, audiences in the states and abroad were joyfully shocked by the level of humanism present in Macmillan’s highly realistic representation of humanity and relationships. I was moved by observations, like that of *The Guardian*, which referenced Macmillan’s nuanced understanding of, “a generation for whom uncertainty is a way of life.” The subject matter of Duncan’s play reflects his understanding of today’s societal issues and doubts about the future. Upon my first reading of the script, the character W (woman) shared many of my worries about the development of the planet and the

potential effects of bearing a child in a gradually declining environment. She laments about the number of trees one would have to plant to make up for the carbon footprint of child rearing (2,550). The couple repeatedly grapples with their own morality and whether or not they are good enough people to have a child, listing their positive traits in ways that reveal moments of social commentary by Macmillan:

W: We give to charity.

What?

M: I didn't say anything

W: We do. We give to charity. I do those runs. I've done one anyway and I'll do another one.

M: I didn't say anything.

W: You have a red credit card for Bono's AIDS in Africa thing.

M: I didn't say anything.

...

W: We shouldn't feel guilty about having things when really in the grand scheme of things we are not spoiled, we don't live beyond not too far beyond our means it's not swimming pools and sports cars and

M: I'm not saying anything.

W: We live pretty simply actually, we spend money on food and books and music and films and vacations sometimes and our mortgage and we don't just throw it away and yes it would be lovely to give more I do feel like we should, I wish we could give more but it's just not, we don't have any more

M: hey, just alright, you're

W: am I being crazy?"

Lungs is not only compelling because of its radically natural dialogue or its larger societal statements but also for its revolutionary style of storytelling in which the play has no scene or act breaks. The characters of Man and Woman (M and W) travel through forty years of their relationship without a single pause for the audience to breathe. Heartbreaking scenes of miscarriage are followed by lighter, awkward, and humorous moments of meeting up with an ex. Macmillan captures the intricacies of human life through both realistic dialogue and also time-transcending theatre magic, the latter reflecting the absurdity and speed of life that traditional realism cannot capture.

Having studied mostly traditional realistic scripts (think Miller, Brian Friel, etc.), in my time at Ball State, I found this riff on realism exciting. In addition, I had become interested in answering the question of how to make theatre less elitist, and a radically minimalistic piece of art (Macmillan specifically states that *Lungs* has no set or spectacle of any kind), produced only by students might intrigue young audiences who otherwise feel separated from theatre culture. Putting two people in a space experiencing life together on the same plane as their audience might, I theorized, produce a more humble product that encourages the cultivation of empathy without indulging modern means of spectacle. Some theatre practitioners think that young audiences must be reached by bringing dramatic work to them in a very literal sense of content (e.g. setting *As You Like It* in Seattle in the post grunge era). I would argue that this underestimates both the power of theatrical text and the intellect of young audiences. In fact, if an artist puts her faith in the text, the actors, and the spectators, often she will find that, as it has been for all of human history, a good story will move people. Simple as that.

RESOURCES CONSULTED

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TIMELINE

Summer 2015

My artistic colleagues Joe Colajezzi (senior in the musical theatre department at Ball State) and Nathaniel Thomas (senior in the directing program and current artistic director at Theatre in the Square in Atlanta, Georgia), decided we'd like to collaborate on a project in the fall of senior year. Colajezzi was passionate about doing a straight play as he had only been involved in musicals in his four years here and was interested in navigating this expansion in his repertoire. We collectively read three scripts: *Lungs* by Macmillan, *Hamilton Township* by Jason Grote, and *Jason and Julia* by Jenny Rachel Weiner. *Hamilton Township* required four actors, and its female characters were compelling but in many ways fulfilled pre-existing archetypes. As Colajezzi and I were most compelled by navigating a relationship between the two of us, we ruled this selection out. *Jason and Julia* was similar to *Lungs* in its compelling navigation of a complex heterosexual relationship, but many of the artistic choices relied on projections that, due to the humble circumstances of our production, would not be manageable. Given these drawbacks to our alternative choices and the aforementioned compelling aspects of *Lungs*, we settled on Macmillan's piece and began memorization.

September 2015

Colajezzi, Thomas and I devised a rehearsal schedule. We met as a group three times a week to stage, and Colajezzi and I met twice a week to memorize. As much of Macmillan's dialogue overlaps and interrupts lines, we needed time together to truly have the text down cold. We developed a relationship and noted each character's individual arc- where Woman started with faster rhythms and slowed down as she aged, Man,

largely, did the opposite. This observation drove most of our discoveries over the course of this month.

October 2015

The month before our show opened, we began meeting every weeknight for three hours to rehearse. As our relationship became clearer with each other, Thomas turned our attention back to analyzing the text and approaching it from a technical level in order to make sure the audience followed our tangents and navigation of the difficult language. In addition to acting in the show, I developed a publicity campaign on social networking, created a poster, and gained departmental permission to rent out a space.

November 2015

The play truly came to life in performance. Much like when one is engaged in a relationship, it became difficult to notice the inherent humor and absurdity in our fictional fights over time, and once staged, we were amazed at the emotional range of the play evident in the audiences' reactions. Per my hopes of reaching young theatre audiences differently with a radically inspired production (outlined in my project justification), many students and professors who frequent the university theatre productions called *Lungs* one of the best works they had seen at Ball State, largely due to its intimacy and honesty. We nearly sold out every night of our run, and raised a hundred dollars for scholarships in the Department of Theatre and Dance.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

In the fall of my twenty-first year, I found my first studio apartment infested with wasps. I still don't know whether there was a hole in a window or a nest nestled in brick but either way, I awoke morning after morning to carcasses of tiny, yellow-black threats that, having crawled through insecticides, lay dying at the foot of my front door. This served as both a festive start to senior year and an extremely timely plague that paralleled my exile from a land I once thought holy: the American stage and screen.

I began my pursuit of a BFA in Acting because I believe that words and ideas can change the world. This concept was first articulated to me upon watching *Dead Poets Society* at age twelve, and it fermented into a fine wine of idealism that has carried me through my artistic life. I do believe that theatre has the power to change the world. I believe that we have the power to change theatre. The arts are one of the best means we have of affecting and reflecting our history, and I am proud to call myself an artist.

That said, just as the theatrical arts are beautiful because they reflect our society, they are flawed because they reflect our society. Voices minoritized in daily life are similarly minoritized onstage. Many of the most capable actresses I know are stuck playing the sassy best friend (if they are black), the sexy, spicy vixen (if Latina), a problematic point on the sliding scale of the slut/virgin dichotomy (if conventionally attractive), a joke (if they are larger than a size 7), or any other pigeonhole that belongs to the idea of a person rather than a real human being. Upon auditioning for senior showcases for BFA students, professors told me that while casting directors thought I was a brilliant actress, most agents would assume I would not obtain regular work for a decade because I do not "look" and "act" like a twenty-one year old. This is arguable as I

am a twenty-one year old, and therefore I inherently look and act like one, but in the eyes of an American audience, I am not girly nor flighty nor skinny nor short enough to portray a young woman. Society has come a long way in that I am merely too tall and too smart to be twenty; I will surely book a Shonda Rhimes show once I am old enough to qualify as a “strong” woman. We now acknowledge that “strong” women exist, just that they are a specific archetypal character (not every woman qualifies as a “strong” woman), that they suddenly come upon their strength in early middle age, and that they are often emotionally incapable of maintaining healthy relationships because they are too busy being “like a man.”

In short, I was quite lost and quickly losing faith in the force of storytelling, a basic human instinct that had been my lens into the world for as long as I could remember. So I decided to invest myself in a piece of theatre I believed in—*Lungs* by Duncan Macmillan—and use the work in said production as my senior honors project.

Lungs compelled me because it was largely the opposite of the commercial theatre I was quickly losing faith in. Macmillan specified in the script that the actors were allowed no set, no lighting effects, no soundtrack, no elaborate costumes, and no transitions between scenes. It was a seamless play that navigated forty years of a couple’s relationship without a single pause, just a stream of conversations between man and woman. The dialogue was written in hyperrealism, meaning the characters overlapped and cut themselves off mimicking one’s daily conversations (this feature also made the script nearly impossible to memorize, but I like a challenge). We performed it for thirty people a night in a theatre classroom, and it was the humblest and most accessible version of theatre I could imagine on a college campus.

When it ended, I felt empty. Not in the sense that it had made me full and its absence drained me, but in the sense that I expected it to fill my soul with joy and instead I was lukewarm.

I had intended to explore the most accessible, inclusive version of theatre I could—a play that did not sell 1,200 dollar tickets, that had no spectacle, that at its heart was a human piece about humans. A play whose text explored the dichotomy of personal desire and societal responsibility, whose female protagonist was just as ugly and sweet as her male counterpart. A play that was the hardest acting challenge I had ever taken on, that was everything I had ever wanted in a theatrical experience. People cried. People loved it. And I never wanted to do it again. I was exhausted and dissatisfied and felt like I had binged on cheeseburgers and fries when I had only the appetite for fruit salad.

Several days after closing, I found myself staring at the headshots and resumes set out for a season of auditions to come, and I recounted the moments from the past months that had felt so wrong. There was the time I was seated in a circle with my peers prior to showcase auditions and a visiting agent described himself as “seller,” a visiting casting director as “buyer,” and myself and my fellow actors as “products.” There were the times I found myself lying in interviews about wanting to get a commercial agent. There were the horrifying daydreams tracking my routes in and out of appointments trying to book television spots for orange juice or diapers or low-calorie ice cream. Deeper than all of that was the nagging feeling that storytelling was inherently egotistical, that I was an egoist for thinking an art form was noble that catered almost exclusively to the white, educated, upper middle class elite.

I recounted the moments from the past months that felt so right. I had started posting tiny poems to social media applications, and my peers started sending me their writing for comments. I had qualified to compete at the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational. I had fallen madly in love with the work of Lin Manuel Miranda, an actor, writer and composer who, upon finding little room for his voice in the world, wrote and starred in two brilliant Broadway musicals.

It was after these thoughts while listening to Miranda's soundtrack to *Hamilton* that I thought to myself, "This is what I want. This is who I am." Not that I never wanted to act in another play again or that I could never see myself doing work in commercial theatre, but that my ultimate goal, the source of my joy, was putting my voice into the world in a way that accessed other people. Not my voice articulating other people's words but *my* voice, the things I thought were important, the words I thought were beautiful, my holy anger, my infinite joy, performed with such deep passion and love that I might nudge the world in a direction I liked better. I had (and have) no idea what that exactly looks like. I don't know how to follow in the footsteps of artists like Miranda or Tony-award winning actor and playwright Sarah Jones (look her up on YouTube; it's important), because they didn't follow in footsteps. They took inspiration from many wiser than them and made their own paths somewhere between the footsteps of their predecessors. I don't know how to do that, except that I know to continue unleashing my wildfire heart and my lion's brain on paper, onstage, everywhere I can. I am exploding, and yet utterly and completely clueless.

The man I love recently asked me what I consider to be my greatest accomplishment. I found it somewhere trapped between good grades and strong

performances and scholarships. It is the capacity to look firmly into the eyes of important people and confidently admit that I know nothing. I am beyond pretending that I know plays or philosophies or people that are, as of yet, out of reach in some contrived effort to convince you I come from or belong to a savvy, suave place like that neighborhood in Brooklyn you've never heard of. I am not, and I do not.

The conclusions I have drawn from this process are the following: I am a storyteller, a good one, and with some practice I will unleash miraculous things upon this world. I'd like to help people feel things. I believe in empathy, and I believe in love.

As I climb into the winter of my twenty-first year, I find my first studio apartment infested with potential. I don't know if the wasps have died out with the cooler air or if they are laying dormant ready to return in the spring (an extremely timely plague for my exile from academia), but for now I am free of yellow-black threats. For now, there is only the ever-buzzing possibility that lives in my skin.